

# Decolonising Deep-Sea Gothic: Perspectives from the Americas

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## Abstract:

This article argues that gothic tropes are central to depictions of the ocean across different genres and forms, but there is a colonial and decolonial trend in the use of horror in portrayal of the sea. This article identifies how gothic depictions of the deep-sea form part of a specific tradition of ecophobic representations of the deep in western narratives aiming to control and commodify. These depictions are profoundly marked by colonial legacies, as this paper shows by analysing briefly Rudyard Kipling's poem 'The Deep-Sea Cables' (1896) and William Eubank's film *Underwater* (2020). The article then considers how gothic tropes persisting in post-colonial and decolonial cultural productions serve to identify, first, structural colonial violence still present today; and second, an anxiety about our ecosystem in a time of climate crisis in Rita Indiana's novel *La Mucama de Omicunlé* (2015) and works emerging from the Caribbean and Latin America.

**Keywords:** Deep-Sea; Americas; Rita Indiana; Rudyard Kipling; Tentacles; Mermaids.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said notes how the colony, as the root of French and British wealth, permeates the novel form, whether it is briefly mentioned or identified between the lines through a practice of contrapuntal reading.<sup>1</sup> A similar argument can be made about the ocean, which – inseparable from slavery and plantation agriculture – is at the historical heart of our current economic system. 'Global capitalism is a seaborne phenomenon', as Liam Campling and Alejandro Colás put it.<sup>2</sup> The ocean, as a surface on which to trade and exchange, has been and

*Gothic Studies* 24.3 (2022): 275–294

Edinburgh University Press

DOI: 10.3366/gothic.2022.0142

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continues to be central to the development of the global economy. However, the ocean is not merely a surface: it has volume. In its depth, chemical processes occur, biological life exists, and telluric currents connect the underground earth and the sea. The ocean produces 50% of our planet's oxygen, sustaining the life of its fauna and flora, some of which we eat and some of which participate in the segregation of carbon.<sup>3</sup> As H.-O. Pörtner *et al* explain, the ocean

absorbs more than 90% of the heat resulting from greenhouse gas emissions, therefore limiting the warming of the air we breathe and playing an essential part in climate regulation. More than 3 billion people depend on food resources and proteins produced by the ocean, and more than a quarter lives less than 100 km away from the coast.<sup>4</sup>

We are thus deeply entangled with the ocean, not only economically and socio-politically, but also more fundamentally as a species. In the spirit of Said's work, we might say then that the ocean, as a condition of possibility for economic and other facets of life, is also a condition of possibility for cultural production globally: every work, whether directly or indirectly, could thus be understood as depicting the sea, or depicting a life that would be unsustainable without the sea.

If the sea is directly depicted, it is often either as a space of leisure, a surface or a beach, or as a space of fantasy and horror, and it is in this latter mode that the ocean's depths are most frequently materialised. The deep-sea is often represented in gothic terms, notably in western narratives, in ways which alienate the ocean from us, instead of acknowledging the reality that the deep-sea is an integral and vital part of our ecosystem. Indeed, what is described as the deep-sea 'refers to waters deeper than 200 meters. Therefore, given the size and expanse of the ocean, "deep sea" equates to 94.7% of the total oceans [sic] volume and 98.2% of its depth range', hence, '*most of the sea is deep sea*',<sup>5</sup> which means that representations of the depths as monstrous or alien actually refer to the greater proportion of the planetary ocean.

This article argues that gothic tropes are central to depictions of the ocean across different genres and media forms, but that there is a colonial and decolonial trend in the use of horror to portray the sea. I will first identify how gothic depictions of the deep-sea form part of a specific tradition of ecophobic representations of the deep in western narratives that aim to control and commodify it. Over time, these become mapped onto narratives of space conquest, both in scientific and cultural contexts. These depictions are profoundly marked by colonial legacies, as I show in a brief analysis of Rudyard Kipling's poem 'The Deep-Sea Cables' (1896)

and William Eubank's film *Underwater* (2020). I then consider how horror and gothic tropes persisting in post-colonial cultural productions serve to identify first the structural and systemic colonial violences still present today; and second, an eco-anxiety *for* and *with* our ecosystem in a time of climate crisis. I focus mainly on Rita Indiana's novel *La Mucama de Omicunlé* (2015) and connect it to several works emerging from the Caribbean and Latin America and to African-American cultural productions, which engage with similar tropes. This is done by identifying a genealogy in post-colonial depictions of tentacularity and mer-people.

### **Whose Reality and Whose Realism? The Gothic of the Americas**

The term 'Gothic' has not often been used to characterise works emerging from Latin America and the Caribbean, despite many containing formal elements which align them to this genre. According to Inés Ordiz and Sandra Casanova-Vizcaíno,

Latin American Gothic fiction has remained a marginalized form compared to the fantastic and (even more so) to magical realist fiction; in fact, the latter was considered by critics to be a singularly Latin American and Caribbean literary phenomenon until recently. The reasons for this marginalization are both locally socio-historical and related to the rejection that the term 'Gothic' received as it appeared in various contexts and cultures worldwide.<sup>6</sup>

Magical realism, or sometimes the fantastic, as the 'proper' nomenclature thus replaced the use of the Gothic label for decades. However, scholars like Ordiz and Casanova-Vizcaíno have been identifying the profoundly gothic nature of Latin American and Caribbean cultural productions. In particular, in post-colonial literatures, the 'occultism' of the Gothic genre plays a crucial role in the erasure of production and labour conditions in the colonies. In developing capitalist society

Rather than remembering, in good Marxist fashion, that the laborer is the one who produces the object and its (added) value, the occultist takes the object for an autonomous agent, enhancing its status as a fetish while seeking to deny it. Historical processes and the fact that it is people who oppress people are obfuscated.<sup>7</sup>

The Gothic genre, due in part to the period in which it developed, is inherently linked to colonialism. It is apt to negotiate anxieties present during colonialism, or rather to express the lack of said negotiation, which in turn fosters the creation of a literature of dread, as Patrick Brantlinger notes.<sup>8</sup> In this study, Brantlinger focuses on the format of the

novel specifically, though both prose and poetry collude with colonialism in different ways.<sup>9</sup> It has therefore become accepted that both colonial and post-colonial Gothic exist, either as subgenres or as a central strand of the Gothic genre more widely. This article adopts the view that the Gothic is intrinsically entangled with colonialism and is thus a crucial factor to consider when engaging with decolonisation and the post-colonial state.

At this juncture, it is worth noting, however, that a 'post-colonial state' may be seen only on a temporal scale. Our current world is not completely a 'post-colonial' one, as Neil Lazarus argues in speaking about social developments up to the twenty-first century:

For, conjoining violence and military conquest with expropriation, pillage, and undisguised grabbing for resources, these developments have demonstrably rejoined the twenty-first century to a long and as yet unbroken history, wrongly supposed by postcolonial theory to have come to a close *circa* 1975. This is the history of capitalist imperialism.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, while formal colonialism may have ended, imperial practices have not; they are maintained socio-politically and economically through racial and structural inequalities across the globe, showing the pitfalls of using the term 'post-colonial'.<sup>11</sup> This article thus differentiates 'post-colonial' as a temporal marker (the time after formal colonialism), from 'decolonial' as a term signifying ongoing material, cultural, epistemological and spiritual processes. I engage with the concept of decoloniality, as defined by authors such as Anibal Quijano, Walter D. Mignolo, Frantz Fanon, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the term 'post-colonial' will be used throughout to refer to spatial and temporal contexts considered to exist after formal colonisation has ended, thus to identify authors or work from a formerly colonised place, while 'decolonial' to denote a continuous practice that fights against colonial and imperial violence, whether conceptual or material. The use of the latter term emphasises the consideration noted above by Lazarus, that colonial and imperial practices continue today. Notably, the Gothic has been seen as a genre allowing authors to represent the brutality of colonial and imperial practices: 'Postcolonial authors have frequently adopted the Gothic as a mode well suited to registering colonial violence and critiquing colonial discourse'.<sup>13</sup> Gothic, Horror, Scifi and other non-realist genres permit the highlighting of lived realities in formerly colonised spaces. The scenario of the alien invasion or abduction, the pandemic plot, monstrous threats sucking people's blood or devouring them and consuming land and seascapes: all embody different stages of colonial and imperial enterprises.

## Decolonising Deep-Sea Gothic

According to Michael Löwy, ‘paintings, films, books that *do not* try to represent life as it really is belong to the realm of irrealism. Irrealist works of art can take various forms: gothic novels, fairy tales, fantastic stories’, among others.<sup>14</sup> Importantly, however, one may ask after the subject of these representations: they depart from ‘life as it really is’, according to whom? If one uses the term irrealism or the nomenclature of magical realism, one is implicitly raising a supposedly oxymoronic association between magic and realism, but it remains unclear who decides what realistic and realism mean. Whose life is it that we may take as a basis for realism, and the departures from it? In Löwy’s account, realism (and by extension irrealism) are deeply connected with the rise of the European novel, and thus their engagements with actual life are limited to Europe and other Western cultural contexts. Thus, one may say that reality or realism are only a matter of perception. Moreover, the material and cultural brutality of colonialism and imperialism pose their own challenges:

the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) suggest that irrealist writing is a pervasive feature of world literature produced at moments of systemic crisis, which they suggest is due to its ‘in-mixing of the imaginary and the factual’ that is ‘more sensitive’ to registering ‘specific circumstances of combined and uneven development’ [...]. Understood as such, the Gothic is not a means of escape, but a means of re-engagement with the lived realities of twenty-first-century postcolonial societies in the face of systemic violence and the structural exclusion of minority voices.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the Gothic genre can be understood not only as excavating repressed and brutal histories of colonialism, but also the contemporary structural and systemic inequalities that are being erased. These, as Christina Sharpe reminds us, are part of ‘a past that is not past’ and necessitate new concepts, such as Sharpe’s own notion of ‘living in the wake’:

The work we do requires new modes and methods of research and teaching; new ways of entering and leaving the archives of slavery, of undoing the ‘racial calculus and [...] political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago’ (Hartman 2008, 6) and that live into the present. [...] With this as the ground, I’ve been trying to articulate a method of encountering a *past that is not past*. A method along the lines of a sitting with, a gathering, and a tracking of phenomena that disproportionately and devastatingly affect Black peoples any and everywhere we are.<sup>16</sup>

In Sarah Iltott’s view, post-colonial Gothic similarly engages with a violence that is continually visited upon Afro-descendant and indigenous peoples. This violence is twinned with environmental destruction; the

socio-ecological brutality of colonial and imperial practices destroys ecosystemic relations by mobilising people, lands and waterways for wealth accumulation. As Karl Marx notes, 'capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt'.<sup>17</sup> The powerful image conjured up here, paralleling blood and dirt, has been revised by many scholars in the Latin American and Caribbean context, most famously in Eduardo Galeano's seminal work *Las Venas Abiertas de América Latina*.

Socio-environmental destruction is a central theme in Gothic literature, as Sharae Deckard notes:

If Gothic often turns around a 'return of the repressed' that reveals buried social truths, EcoGothic turns around the uncanny manifestation of the 'environmental unconscious', particularly those forms of environmental violence that have been occulted. Whether this revelation is a cause for fear or for triumph is a question of the politics of the text.<sup>18</sup>

And what environmental violences have been more occulted than those originating from colonialism and imperialism? Deckard notes the critical nature of ecoGothic and provides a survey of texts that engage with colonial histories. Interestingly, Deckard challenges the idea that all ecoGothic narratives must be ecophobic.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Christy Tidwell and Carter Soles note that 'Fear is not simply a reflection of deep-seated hatred. Sometimes it is justified and necessary. Further, ecohorror is not defined solely by human fear *of* nonhuman nature but is also frequently concerned with human fear *for* nonhuman nature'.<sup>20</sup> Pushing this further, and in the context of understanding the ecosystemic relationality in which we live – a relationality that is central in non-Eurocentric epistemologies – I suggest that we may also consider the idea of fear *with* extra-human nature. This is not only because our current climate crisis is socio-ecological and we fear alongside our extra-human 'kin', but also because, in the words of Martinican poet André Pierre-Louis Monchoachi, '*nous habitons un corps*' (we inhabit a body).<sup>21</sup> Monchoachi explores in this text the different manners in which Antillean people and Creole language is better suited to articulating ecosystemic relationality by conceiving the planet as a body to which we belong.<sup>22</sup> Thus ecoGothic tropes can articulate our own dread as global warming destroys our ecosystem, including organisms that provide our oxygen, including plants and the ocean; this is 'a scale of breathing', which, as Alexis Pauline Gumbs importantly reminds us, 'is shared'.<sup>23</sup>

In this article I thus explore fear *for* and *with* the ocean, as well as, fear *of* the ocean. These anxieties have also been investigated in recent works that describe, as possible subgenres of the Gothic, the 'Maritime Gothic'

(Coral Ann Howells), the 'Nautical Gothic' (Emily Alder) or the 'Gothic Deep' (Jimmy Packham and David Punter). As all these authors note, the Gothic is a genre profoundly interrelated with the ocean,<sup>24</sup> and this article is indebted to these arguments, which are leading an analytic revision of both sea and 'non-sea-literature' to reconsider the role of the ocean in Gothic studies. As Alder asks, 'what might an *oceanography* of Gothic fiction look like?'.<sup>25</sup> Building on this pioneering and important work, this article outlines what I call 'Deep-Sea Gothic', a term that – because nearly all the sea is deep-sea – refers to the ocean as a whole in all its volume, pressure, biology, and chemistry, while also maintaining the depth as a focus given its connection to the oceanic fear factor. I suggest that at the core of the Deep-Sea Gothic there exists a fear *for* the ocean in Western texts, which parallels a more dominant fear *of*. However, when identifying Deep-Sea Gothic tropes in post-colonial narratives of the Americas, a fear *with* becomes clearer, as ecosystemic relationality with the ocean is emphasised in a way which can be extended to oceanic cultures globally. This fear with challenges the colonial monsterring of the ocean, which, as Jolene Mathieson notes, has wider implications: 'by alienating such natural environments and the species that live in them, as residents of a shared ecosystem, we are, in fact, monsterring and alienating ourselves'.<sup>26</sup>

### **In the Deep No One can Hear You Scream: From Deep-Sea Cables to Deep-Sea Mining**

This self-alienation can be seen in Kipling's poem 'The Deep-Sea Cables' (1896) in which the momentous development of globalisation is explored as telegraphic cables are laid underwater to facilitate transatlantic communication. The poem describes the deep-sea as an empty, silent and dreadful space over which human technology is taking control: 'Down to the dark, to the utter dark, where the blind white sea-snakes are. / There is no sound, no echo of sound, in the deserts of the deep, / Or the great grey level plains of ooze where the shell-burred cables creep. ... / For a Power troubles the Still that has neither voice nor feet.'<sup>27</sup> The poem spoliates the seabed from all its life and liveliness; alliterations rhythmically echo across the lines, emphasising the supposed silence of the sea as if reverberating in an empty room. The ironic use of the term 'desert' to describe the emptiness of the ocean emphasises also the troubling threat that the sea represents: it is not a place where water itself is absent, but rather one filled with a water that we cannot drink, that may in fact kill us. The capitalisation of the term 'Power', designating the Euro-American connection via the cables, reminds us of their imperial history and future, as the telecommunicative connection between these

regions cements their geopolitical collaboration. Indeed, the poem concludes with a whisper suggesting “Let us be one!”<sup>28</sup>

However, despite this show of force, the poem betrays anxieties that are not limited to an ecophobic suspicion of the ocean. The poem contains fears about technological advancements and globalisation; as Alexander Bubb notes, it ‘imagines a technological zenith that effectively marks the end of history, a consummation described [...] apocalyptically [...] as men’s murder “their father Time”’.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, in the half line preceding this latter one, the poem notes that men have ‘wakened the timeless Things’ by ‘Joining hands in the gloom’.<sup>30</sup> Though this may refer to the awakening of the cables though the literal connection of the two continents, it may also be interpreted as referring to primordial underwater monsters awakened by men’s technological hubris, just as Victor Frankenstein’s creature was awakened by his maker’s medical ambitions. Hence, Dominic Davies notes that though Kipling’s poem ‘map[s] the imperial networks that fix, arrest and regulate space and time, both symbolically and actually, [...] enhancing imperial control over colonial spaces and enabling the kinds of global economic and social exchange that we are used to today’, it also contains a ‘sense of futility’.<sup>31</sup> While Davies focuses on the weakness of ‘men’s’ communication described in the poem,<sup>32</sup> I suggest that this hesitation also pertains to anxieties about our possible inability to actually *control* the deep-sea. The point is addressed by Jon Phillips as follows:

Whether the subject of management is the extraction of (mobile) fish or (non-mobile) fossil fuels, efforts to construct territory in the deep ocean that build upon terrestrial ontological assumptions have been confounded by the movement of water and the human and non-human actors that move with it and through it.<sup>33</sup>

The deep-sea thus continues to escape attempts of control, and scientific discourse appears to betray such anxieties as well.

In the BBC’s recent *Our Planet* (2019) documentary series, the episode on the high seas relies heavily on tropes of lawlessness and the frontier. In *The Blue Planet* (2001) series, only fifty seconds in, David Attenborough invites the audience to venture to an alien world never revealed before, as Ruth Heholt and Melissa Edmundson describe:

In this beautiful and benign programme, there is darkness as fish feeds on fish and there is the constant fear of danger which can rise up from the black chasms of the oceans [...] The ‘alien’ needs to be made comprehensible, to be labelled, and contained [...] *The Blue Planet* is of course not a Gothic text but there are crossovers in how it represents the alien and outlandish.<sup>34</sup>



Relatedly, they continue, ‘David Punter and Elizabeth Bronfen contend that “the uncanny, the disorder, the alien-ness that Gothic appears to *express* might be better seen precisely as evidence of what the genre is seeking to *control*”’.<sup>35</sup> *The Blue Planet* thus associates the depth of the ocean to outer space, and is only one among many science-communication projects which use horror tropes to represent the deep-sea. These often map onto a narrative of space conquest, and hinge on comparisons with space.<sup>36</sup> Though horror tropes may sell, it could be argued that they impede objectives of raising awareness and promoting care for the ocean. As Alan J. Jamieson *et al.* write of *The Blue Planet* episode entitled *The Deep*, ‘instead of cultivating stewardship and personal connectivity, [this text] is the most recent in a long line of documentaries that have capitalized on thalassophobia stimulation for entertainment’.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, a recent book by oceanographer Alex Rogers – *The Deep: The Hidden Wonders of Our Oceans and How We Can Protect Them* – uses similar tropes. Notably, the pluralisation of the ocean in Rogers’ subtitle undermines the reality of our planetary ocean unity, and so inadvertently foregrounds the need to ‘abandon the myth of the seven seas’.<sup>38</sup> Throughout the book deep-sea animals are ‘strange and incredible’ and ‘bizarre’, hydrothermal vents ‘looked other-worldly’ and the ‘worst science fiction movie horrors have nothing on sea stars’.<sup>39</sup> Rogers describe a deep-lying environment as follows: ‘Solidified lava lay everywhere, sometimes looking like piles of enormous striated ropes, hands, or even skulls. It was a landscape straight out of the movie *Alien*, when the crew of the *Nostromo* had fatefully landed on an unexplored world to find an alien spacecraft’.<sup>40</sup> This reference clearly reflects current cultural myths that often associate the oceanic depth and its exploration to space, a tendency demonstrated most clearly by the 2020 blockbuster movie *Underwater*, about which I will say more below. As Peter Hand tells us, this connection is one that appears repeatedly in scientific and public discourse as we learn more about the ocean and outer space.<sup>41</sup>

While the conquest of space first inherited the vocabulary of maritime exploration, over time space knowledge started to be mapped on the deep-sea. Particularly during the Cold War era, both sea and space were a prize for which superpowers were competing. At this time of extreme global polarisation and inflamed tensions, the sea represented a space of opportunity to explore before the enemy, but also ‘a three-dimensional space in which the enemy could prowl unseen in nuclear-powered submarines, cloaked by water and ice and capable of wreaking havoc on land and from the air’.<sup>42</sup> Thus enemy military power replaced sea monsters continuing to make the depth an alien and dangerous space.

Moreover, Fred Scharmen notes that turning our gaze upward to outer space in that period was also a way of avoiding focusing on inequalities of the time, which are still present today:

How can the US government justify putting ‘whitey on the Moon’, wonders poet and musician Gil Scott-Heron in his song of the same name, when they have failed to address the legacy of slavery, racism, and injustice for the country’s Black population?<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, current discussions concerning deep-sea mining do not address histories of extractivism and environmental injustices. In June 2021, the president of the Pacific island-nation Nauru, Lionel Aingimea, backed by the Canadian mining company The Metals Company, formerly DeepGreen Metals, notified the International Seabed Authority of their intention to begin mining the seabed in two years, setting a deadline for the body to create a regulatory framework.<sup>44</sup> This collaboration underscores Nauru’s long history of colonial extractivism. The Pacific Island needs the wealth that deep-sea mining could generate because it struggles to survive after strip-mining of phosphate by Britain and Australia pushed it to an environmental crisis. Disguised in the rhetoric of green technology and discovery for the future, deep-sea mining and space exploration both elide stark unevenness and injustices that continue to situate marginalised and previously colonised places in harm’s way. The likelihood of destroying marine biodiversity, and possibly endangering our ecosystem as a result, is significantly understated. Moreover, mining could release sedimented carbon into the ocean and atmosphere, intensifying ocean acidification and increasing greenhouse gases, thus exacerbating global warming. Finally, many risks attend small islands communities who live much nearer to the sites to be mined.

Deep-sea mining risks are present in the horror sci-fi movie *Underwater* (2020), directed by William Eubank. The film unfolds in a drilling and research facility in the Mariana Trench, which closely resembles a base in outer space, echoing the *Alien* film franchise. After an earthquake strikes and destroys part of the facility, the audience follows employee-protagonists as they try to reach escape pods to return to the ocean’s surface, including a scene in which they walk on the seafloor. This scene further associates the movie with *Alien*, cemented by the focus on a female lead, as the protagonists wear underwater outfits reminiscent of space suits, and the depiction of marine snow and oceanic flow mirror a lunar landscape and low-gravity movements.

The film also engages with H. P. Lovecraft’s Cthulu mythos as it turns out the earthquake is caused by the awakening of a tentacled monster,

## Decolonising Deep-Sea Gothic

which appears as the movie climaxes and the protagonists are close to escaping. Drilling woke the primordial monster resting under the seabed, invoking immemorial fears of the uncharted oceans preceding Lovecraft's work:

You may have seen old maps, maps where sea monsters, giant squid, and dragons dot the vast expanse of the seas yet to be explored. One globe from 1510 bears the phrase that has become synonymous with unknown dangers and risks: *Hic sunt dracones*; 'Here be dragons.' The ocean has long been the source of myths and legends. It was – and continues to be – home to aliens of a closer kind.<sup>45</sup>

When the film concludes and the credits roll out, China, identified in the film as the owner of the fictional drilling company, is highly criticised by media cuttings for ignoring the catastrophe and resuming drilling after covering up the monster's attack. The use of the country as the villain in the film evidences Cold War bipolarised political legacies, as well as anxieties concerning these politics. This period, as discussed above, was key in the race to space and deep-sea conquest.

Additionally, in the context of a planetary crisis proven to have been accelerated by anthropogenic impact, the movie raises issues about our relation to the environment, especially given that deep-sea mining may potentially become reality. The use of gothic tropes evidence both a deep-seated fear of the seabed and a general dread of the climate crisis' impact on the ocean, as depictions of the sea either 'as climate change aggressor' or a climate change 'victim' show.<sup>46</sup> Jessica Lehman and Elizabeth Johnson have explored how our 'ocean imaginary' must change in order to 'understand the oceans beyond binary terms as risky or at risk – and to see them as deeply connected to land-based human activities and social and economic value systems'.<sup>47</sup> This is a change that must happen in our scientific imaginaries too: scientific nomenclature encloses the deep and its living organisms in myth, often with horror undertones, thus resonating with and compounding a wider tendency to depict the depths via gothic tropes. Jamieson *et al* point out that

much of the language used to describe the deep sea exaggerates the chthonic (relating to or inhabiting the underworld): the profound depths are technically termed *abyssal* (3000–6000 m) and *hadal* (>6000 m), where abyssal means 'a deep or seemingly bottomless chasm' and hadal is derived from *Hades*, the lord and kingdom of the underworld, where souls go after death, in Greek mythology.<sup>48</sup>

For further apt examples, we might consider the gothically-named Ghost Shark, also called Opal Chimaera (*Chimaera opalescens*) after the hybrid creature of Greek mythology, or the Vampire Squid, *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, meaning literally, the Vampire Squid from Hell. The monstrous intertextuality between scientific naming and myths is confronted by Gumbs in the important recent work entitled *Undrowned*, as the author realises that ‘some work [must be done] to disrupt the violent colonizing languages of almost all the texts in which I have accessed information about marine mammals and their lives’.<sup>49</sup> Science, colonialism and racism have a deeply entangled history and one that is extended to the ocean, not only due to the ocean’s role in the development of colonisation and our current global economy, but also due to the use of monstrous language in deep-sea science. Monstrosity and colonialism are inter-related and

monstrous figures ... can be understood as literary monuments of colonial relations, signifiers that represent a vestige of this history, and they can be read as depicting the monumental ruins, or material traces, of colonial pasts and monstrosity as representing the corporeal embodiment of empire’s violence.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, deep-sea depictions and scientific discourse require decolonising.

**From Tentacles to Tails: Articulating Ecosystemic Relations to the Deep**  
Donna Haraway proposes to decolonise and de-monster the *Chthulu*: ‘Making a small change in the biologist’s taxonomic spelling, from *cthulhu* to *chthulu* [...] I propose a name for an elsewhere and elsewhere that was, still is, and might yet be: the *Chthulucene*’.<sup>51</sup> As Haraway notes, ‘[m]yriad tentacles will be needed to tell the story of the *Chthulucene*’, which is ‘past, present, and to come. These real and possible time-spaces are not named after sf writer H. P. Lovecraft’s misogynist racial-nightmare monster *Cthulhu* (note spelling difference), but rather after the diverse earthwide tentacular powers and forces’.<sup>52</sup> Rita Indiana, author and musician from the Dominican Republic, also considers another tentacularity and Afro-Caribbean ocean deities in her fourth novel *La Mucama de Omicunlé* (2015) translated into English as *Tentacle* (2018). Kerstin Oloff and Sharae Deckard note that ‘Indiana’s turn to the Oceanic Weird is mediated predominantly via the fiction of H. P. Lovecraft, which teems with fears of deep geological time, natural immanence, and the alterity of both nonhuman life and non-European civilization’.<sup>53</sup>

By engaging with Lovecraft’s racist and ecophobic legacy, Indiana’s speculative work connects the colonial past of the Caribbean with dread,

reminding us that some horror or scifi tropes have been lived by formerly colonised communities. As Oloff and Deckard note, the novel adapts the tentacled monster 'haunting the Old Weird from ecophobic visions into positive symbols of biodiversity and symbiosis. In particular, Cthulhu is replaced by the *Condylactis gigantea*, otherwise known as the Caribbean Giant Anemone, used to figure the anxieties of looming global environmental catastrophe'.<sup>54</sup> In the novel, the anemone is associated with the Afro-Caribbean Patheon through the deity Olokun: 'Olokun, a marine creature that walked back in time, son, a lovecraftian thing'.<sup>55</sup> The novel thus proposes a decolonisation of tentacularity and mer-diet by returning these to Afro-Caribbean beliefs in the context of *Santería*, thus invoking syncretic beliefs formed after the brutal abduction of peoples from the African continent and their displacement to the Americas:

the time-travelling protagonist Acilde is prophesied to become the earthly son of Olokún, who is described as more ancient than the sea itself, and a sea creature that walks backwards in time [...] Olokún, whose name means 'owner of the ocean,' is 'associated with the treasures that are hidden at the bottom of the sea'.<sup>56</sup>

The novel echoes decolonised tentacular ontologies that were considered by Caribbean authors as early as fifty years prior to its publication, such as those referenced in Édouard Glissant's poem 'Un champs d'îles' ('A Field of Islands', 1965). Glissant notes that the Caribbean's future is tentacular ('*l'avenir tentaculaire*'), in an enjambment reflecting on the possibility of this future keeping the Caribbean hostage to its archipelagic environment.<sup>57</sup> This fear *with* the environment forms part of a longer tradition in Latin American and Caribbean thinking which identifies the region's biodiverse wealth as a curse, given its historical attractiveness for extractive capitalism. These are land- and seascapes that are pushed to eco-catastrophe via overexploitation, as depicted in Indiana's novel where idyllic crystalline beaches advertised to tourists are now 'a dark and putrefying stew'.<sup>58</sup> This reality also exists within a long history of Caribbean maritime *marronage* in which the colonisers' overexploitation of, and focus on, the land enabled the sea to become a space for resistance and escape. Kevin Dawson describes the the way that

[a]s Europeans colonized the land, they treated waterscapes as roads, but not places of belonging, enabling captives to physically and intellectually appropriate rivers, lakes, and seas. Layering African cultural, spiritual, and political meanings onto waters that retained Amerindian valuations, captives recreated and reimagined African traditions.<sup>59</sup>

The ocean is thus a space of life and freedom, but also one of memorialisation in which layered Afro-descendant and indigenous epistemologies permit an identification and fearing *with* the deep-sea. Importantly, this is translated through gothic tropes. Yemayá in the *Santería* depicted in Indiana's novel echoes a trans-American tradition of oceanic divinities and mer-people, which is present in syncretic religions across Latin America and the Caribbean and also in contemporary African American cultural productions. As Persephone Braham explains

Afro-Latin *sirenas* belong to two interrelated traditions: one, mostly in English, which names the West African Mami Wata spirit as the inspiration for Caribbean mermaids; and another, mainly in Spanish, that traces them to the Orishas of the Yoruba religion. [...] The Orisha Yemayá or Yemanjá is the mother of the oceans in Yoruba religion, and is often visualised as a *sirena* holding a conch. While terrible when provoked, she has also acquired the nurturing qualities of the Virgin and is worshipped as a protector of women and children and a force for justice. In Yoruba-derived religions in Cuba and Brazil, Yemayá is known as the mother of all the gods and humans. She is the goddess of water; but there is far greater specialisation among the Orishas than the South American spirits.<sup>60</sup>

A merging of the European mermaid with African and Amerindian beliefs, Mami Wata '(pidgin English for "Mother Water" or Mistress Water," sometimes rendered as "Mammy Water")<sup>61</sup> – or even Man or Manman dlo in French Creole – 'epitomizes and embodies hybridity. She is a transcendent, transformative, transcultural, transnational, transgendered, and trans-Atlantic being. She straddles both land and water, culture and nature (being half-human, half-fish).<sup>62</sup> Recurrences of the Mami Wata character, however, do not aim to merely celebrate Mami Wata's hybridity, which would eclipse the violence and brutality of colonisation behind it. The ambivalence of Mami Wata gives authors the ability to break down binaries including that between gender, race and the human and extra-human nature, since this character is 'as fluid and as amorphous as water itself.'<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, Mami Wata also destabilises binaries violently imposed on indigenous and Afro-Atlantic epistemologies through systematic colonial policy and racist colonial ideology.<sup>64</sup> This epistemological and material violence also imposes a realism on arts, which is constantly challenged by post-colonial cultural productions which ask what realism there can be outside of the Eurocentric perspective, as noted in a previous section of this article. Mami Wata also retains the Atlantic colonial past through the gothic trope of cannibalism associated with representations of this character, making it both feared and revered. This embodiment of brutality and consumption

## *Decolonising Deep-Sea Gothic*

memorialises the Atlantic as a site of death as much as one of life. Latin American, Caribbean and African American authors have used prose and poetry, and different literary genres containing gothic tropes, as well as philosophical works, to remind us of the role of the sea as an archive containing the history of the transatlantic trade.<sup>65</sup> This is not a western understanding of the archive, which, as Sadiya Hartman notes, is a mortuary:

The archive dictates what can be said about the past and the kinds of stories that can be told about the persons catalogued, embalmed, and sealed away in box files and folios. To read the archive is to enter a mortuary; it permits one final viewing and allows for a last glimpse of persons about to disappear into the slave hold.<sup>66</sup>

Instead, it becomes one that acts as a living memorialisation. Indeed, post-colonial narratives which engage with the oceanic space of the Atlantic tell and *retell* colonial histories, thus re-actualising its memorialisation and keeping these critical histories alive, as is the case in Sharpe's *Wake* practice quoted at the beginning of this article. Such an account also challenges a linear understanding of history, inherited from Enlightenment legacies, to promote instead a decolonial, ontological perception of passing time in the oceanic space: one in which time is distorted naturally, not only because of the volume and pressure and the different temporality of extra-human life – where creatures of the deep have been living for hundreds of years – but also because of what remains of the Atlantic trade. Achille Mbembe notes 'the cannibalistic structure of our modernity [...] which was set up during the Atlantic trade and [...] feeds on it for centuries. The world that emerges from this cannibalistic structure is made of innumerable human bones buried at the bottom of the ocean, and, which little by little are fleshing themselves out.'<sup>67</sup> These comments echo a tradition of mer-people narratives that engages with the memorialisation of enslaved Atlantic deaths, using siren-like gothic characters to embody the fact that enslaved people thrown overboard during the Middle Passage are still actually present in the ocean today:

As Anne [Gardulski] told me, "Nobody dies of old age in the ocean." The amount of time it takes for a substance to enter the ocean and then leave the ocean is called residence time. Human blood is salty, and sodium, Gardulski tells me, has a residence time of 260 million years.<sup>68</sup>

This discussion permits us to read Rivers Solomon's novel *The Deep* (2019) with an additional layer of meaning. The novel brings to literary life the musical underwater world of electronic music duo Drexciya,

revealed in their 1997 album *The Quest* and later picked up by experimental hip hop group clipping.'s song 'The Deep' (2017). Drexciya and clipping.'s music starkly opposes Kipling's depiction of the deep-sea as silent and empty, a sense reiterated by Aline Valek's Brazilian Gothic Scifi novel *As águas-vivas não sabem de si (Jellyfish Don't Know About Themselves* 2016), which opens with a journey to the seabed and informs the reader that 'when reaching the bottom there was an explosion of life'.<sup>69</sup> Thus, decolonial and post-colonial narratives revitalise the oceanic depth, envisioning it as teaming with life. They use gothic tropes that remind us, first, of the violence of colonial legacies that have brutally marked the lives of the African diaspora and indigenous peoples in the Americas and continue to mark it in the uneven and racist relations maintained today. Second, such texts also express these communities' fear *with* the ocean as they have been on the frontline of environmental catastrophe for decades.

### Conclusion

This article has argued that gothic tropes are inherent to depictions of the deep-sea, but that they can be approached through a decolonial lens when they appear in post-colonial narratives. Such a reading gives Deep-Sea Gothic another valence. In Western narratives imbued with colonial legacies, these tropes are mostly ecophobic and embody a fear *of* the ocean. Sometimes, this is expanded to a fear *for* the ocean, especially in contemporary works produced in a time of climate crisis, whether these works address this crisis or not. However, it is in decolonial works that emerge from post-colonial regions that Deep-Sea Gothic tropes take on the meaning of fear *with* the ocean, as many authors depict relations of kinship and stewardship to the ocean as they are on the frontline of this crisis along with the deep-sea.

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### Notes

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## Decolonising Deep-Sea Gothic

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18. Sharae Deckard, 'Ecogothic,' in *Twenty-First Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, 175.
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29. Alexander Bubb, 'The Provincial Cosmopolitan: Kipling, India and Globalization,' *Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 49, no. 4 (2013): 397.
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57. Édouard Glissant, *Poèmes Complets* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 61.
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60. Persephone Braham, 'Song of the Sirenas: Mermaids in Latin America and the Caribbean,' in *Scaled for Success: The Internationalisation of the Mermaid*, ed. Philip Hayward (New York: John Libbey & Company, 2018), 164.
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62. *Ibid.*, 295.
63. *Ibid.*
64. Henry John Drewal, 'Beauteous Beast: The Water Deity Mami Wata in Africa,' in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 78.
65. Many cultural productions and philosophical works from the African diaspora in the Americas address such an archive, in parallel, they often include depictions of hybrid mer-people and deities or tentacular relations and tentacled beings, including many poems by St Lucian poet Derek Walcott in *Collected Poems 1948–1984* (Faber and Faber, 1986) and in his epic *Omeros* (Faber and Faber, 1990). See also the work of Martinican poet and thinker Édouard Glissant in his *Poèmes Complets* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994) and his philosophical works *Poétique de la Relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990); *Le discours antillais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997) and *Traité du Tout-Monde. Poétique IV* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997). Consider also the notion of tidalectics theorised by Barbadian author Kamau Brathwaite in *ConVERsations with Nathaniel Mackey* (Staten Island: We Press, 1999). This also includes M. NourbeSe Philip's critical work *Zong!* (Toronto: The Mercury Press, 2008). See also the work of British Virgin Island poet Richard Georges in *Make Us All Islands* (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2017) and a recent anthology of SF poetry and short fiction entitled *Trouble the Waters: Tales from the Deep Blue*, edited by Sheree Renée Thomas, Pan Morigan, and Troy L. Wiggins (Nashville: Third

Man Books LLC., 2022). Novels engaging with this trope also include the work of British-Guyanese author Fred D'Aguiar's also retelling the Zong narrative entitled *Feeding the Ghost* (London: Vintage, 1998) and French Martinican journalist, author, and filmmaker Fabienne Kanor's novel *Humus* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009). See also the work of Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat, such as the novel *Claire of the Sea Light* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013) or several short stories and novelistic work by Canadian-Jamaican author Nalo Hopkinson including the novel *The New Moon's Arms* (New York and Boston: Grand Central Publishing 2007) and short stories in *Falling in Love with Hominids* (San Francisco: Tachyon, 2015). This non-exhaustive list, from which many more exceptional works are missing, shows the breadth of work produced by post-colonial Afro-diasporic and indigenous authors across the Atlantic engaging with such tropes.

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